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Texas

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DAVID G. BURNET'S LETTERS DESCRIBING THE COMANCHE INDIANS WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ERNEST WALLACE

When the United States purchased Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, she acquired within its upper and western limits several powerful Indian tribes of whom the Anglo-Americans had very little or no knowledge. The Comanche was one of these tribes. They had abandoned the upper Missouri-Yellowstone region during the Eighteenth Century for the southern high plains adjacent to the northern settlements of New Spain. The vast domain lying between the Arkansas River and the South Texas Hill Country and between the Cross Timbers on the east and the Pecos River and the mountain ranges of eastern New Mexico and Colorado on the west the Comanche regarded as *Comancheria*, and for more than a century few there were, either red men or white, who intruded against their will.

Convinced of the superiority of their own way of life, the Comanche resolutely refused to compromise with white civilization until they had been defeated and confined to a reservation. No real mutual trust and friendship ever existed between them and any of their white neighbors. Seldom did a white visitor remain within a Comanche village longer than necessary, and it was most unusual for a Comanche to visit a white settlement except to war and plunder. Consequently, reliable accounts of early Comanche society are rare and meager.

One of the earliest and best descriptions of Comanche society by an Anglo-American observer appeared during 1824 in *The Cincinnati Literary Gazette* in serial form under the heading "Indians of Texas." The article is a series of five letters published in six installments. The first four letters, according to the introductory statement, constitute

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114 "A series of letters originally addressed to Col. John Jamison, deceased, late Indian agent at Natchitoches." The first letter is headed "Nacogdoches, Pro. Texas, August 1818." This was almost two years before Stephen Long crossed *Comancheria*, and more than two years were yet to elapse before Moses Austin sought permission of the Spanish authorities at San Antonio to settle Anglo-American colonists in Texas. The fifth letter was a reply to criticism of the article by the world-renowned naturalist and professor at Transylvania University, C. S. Rafinesque. Ranfinesque wrote in the June 19, 1824, issue of the *Literary Gazette*: "I have been much pleased with the accounts of the Comanches and Nabijos, . . . but regret that the writers have totally neglected to notice the languages of those nations, although this ought to claim the first attention in any account of Indian nations, being often the only clue to trace their origin and history. It is also wrong to give anonymous details of historical facts, while so much depends upon personal authority." Most of the reply to the criticism is of no significance; but one section is herein reproduced, since it is "A brief desultory and imperfect vocabulary of the Comanche language." The author of the account—David Gouverneur Burnet of Cincinnati, later to serve as the first president of the Republic of Texas—wrote from personal experiences of more than a year's residence among the Comanche Indians in Texas.

David Gouverneur Burnet was born on April 4, 1788, in Newark, New Jersey. The Burnet family was quite prominent. David's father was a noted physician and a member of the Continental Congress. One of his half-brothers was aide-de-camp to Washington and a close friend of Lafayette; another served as a member of the United States Senate, as an Ohio State Supreme Court Judge, and was elected a member of the French Academy of Science. His brother, Isaac, for twelve years was mayor of Cincinnati.[1]

Left an orphan at the age of three, David grew up under the guidance of his brothers, who saw that he received

113 1. Dorothy Louise Fields, "David Gouverneur Burnet," in The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, XLIX (October, 1945), pp. 215-232.

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a thorough education and then obtained for him a job as a clerk in a New York counting house when he was seventeen. When the firm failed shortly afterwards, David G. Burnet joined the South American revolutionist, Miranda, who was recruiting at the time in New York. While on his way to Venezuela in 1806, he was commissioned first lieutenant in the Miranda forces.[2]

When the Miranda forces met defeat on the Venezuela coast, Burnet returned to New York but in 1808 went again to Venezuela upon receiving news that the revolution had broken out anew. Miranda, however, assured him that the movement was premature and persuaded him to return to the United States.

In 1813 Burnet moved from New York to Cincinnati, where he studied and practiced law until 1817 before going, on account of his health, to the warmer climate of Natchitoches, Louisiana, to enter a mercantile business engaged in trade with the Indians. Here fate a second time intervened to veto a business career for which he had neither interest nor tact anyway. He was seriously threatened with "pulmonary consumption" in the fall of 1817 and, acting upon the advice of his physician, went west into the open country in the region of the headwaters of the Colorado River where, he reported, "During the years 1818-19 I spent a considerable time with, or in the vicinity of the Comanches of Texas."[3] For more than a year he lived as the Indians did, eating only buffalo and other wild meats, sleeping in the open, and roaming the prairies. He reached west Texas so weak that it was difficult for him to mount his horse unaided; he succeeded in regaining his health beyond his utmost expectations.

While at Nacogdoches in the summer of 1818, Burnet began writing his account of the Indians of Texas for Colonel Jamison. Apparently he had not anticipated this request

2. A. M. Hobby, "Life of David G. Burnet," in Texas Almanac (Galveston), 1873, p. 159.
3. David G. Burnet, August 20, 1847, in Henry R. Schoolcraft (ed.), Information Respecting the History, Conditions, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States (Philadelphia, 1851), I, p. 259; Texas Almanac, 1857, pp. 132-8.

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and made his observations without notes, for in 1847 he wrote that "Want of an adequate interpreter would alone have precluded me from acquiring minute statistical and other information necessary to that end, had my mind been specially directed to such an object."[4]

Having succeeded in recovering his health, Burnet proceeded to Cincinnati, where he resumed the study and practice of law. It was while he was thus engaged that the *Literary Gazette* published his observations upon the Indians of Texas. Although it is true that the account fails to give a complete picture of Comanche life, it is one of the best of the time and as such should be preserved for posterity. It is also true that in Henry Schoolcraft's *Information Respecting the History, Conditions, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* Burnet himself recorded his observations in an article entitled "The Comanches and Other Tribes of Texas and the Policy to be Pursued Respecting Them." But Burnet wrote this article in 1847, he apologized, "in the absence of all memoranda, [and] I must draw from a recollection of near thirty years." Within that thirty-year interval a great deal more transpired in the life of David G. Burnet than normally happens in the entire life span of most men, but that is material worthy of a good biography.

The fact that files of *The Cincinnati Literary Gazette* are quite rare is additional reason for reprinting the Burnet letters. The letters reproduced here are from the file in the Gray Herbarium of Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. A similar file is in the Library of Congress.

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, May 8, 1824]

INDIANS OF TEXAS

Nacogdoches, Pro. Texas, August 1818.

Dear Sir:

Yours of—ultimo, acknowledging my Indian schedule, is duly received. You enjoin me to furnish you with a more

4. Burnet, August 20, 1847, in Schoolcraft, *op. cit.*, I, p. 223.

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[ca. 1818]

detailed account of those tribes with whom my adventures 175
in this delightful country have made me familiar. If the 121
results of my observations can contribute to your amusement, or aid your laudable endeavours to acquire information concerning the wide-spread sons of the forest, I shall be amply remunerated for the trouble of imparting them to you.

The Comanchees are the most numerous, and therefore the most important nation of Indians inhabiting this Province, and with them I am more intimately acquainted than with any of the other tribes. I shall give them priority of notice.

Let the long suspended destiny of this most valuable province eventuate as it may: whether it shall continue to languish under the wretched and paralising policy of Spain, or shall be received under the benign guardianship of our own country, the aboriginal inhabitants of it are worthy to be better known and more considered than they now are. If they are too far removed from *home*, the starting place and often the goal of charity, to merit attention for the beneficent purposes of amelioration, they nevertheless present sufficient claims to occasional observance on grounds of an exclusive political nature. The Comanchees more particularly, owing to their proximity to the frontiers of the Ar- 175
kansas Territory, and to their forward and unrestrained 131
habits of rapine, appear, in prospective at least, to sustain 181
some interesting relations to our country. It would not be 000
altogether visionary to predict, that in the course of a few years, these obscure and unnoticed savages will evince their claims to our attention by the massacres and devastations of a border warfare. It is true, they now are, and heretofore 175
have been, peaceably disposed towards us. They find the 648
mules and horses of their ancient enemies, the provincial 721
Spaniards, a more alluring quarry, than is presented by the scattered and humble hamlets of an American frontier. It is true, they are apprized of the difference between the American and the Spanish character; they dread the active energy of the one, as they despise the pusillanimity of the other. Had we a dense and populous front to present them, 175
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they would be in no wise dangerous. But how inadequate is an infant, dispersed, and unorganized settlement, to repel the sudden incursions of an enemy who move with unequalled celerity, and almost inscrutable caution: who traverse the pathless wilderness by day, and pounce on their devoted victims in the unguarded hour of midnight. The national faith and friendships of savages are proverbially treacherous, and are always subordinate to their own weak conceptions of interest, or the more imperative suggestions of fear. The hope of spoil for the most part constitutes their *prium mobile* to hostilities: but they are sometimes capable of adventuring the hazards of battle for the single purpose of revenging real or imaginary injuries.

The Comanchees or I-etans as they are sometimes called, are one among a very few of the primitive nations of Spanish America, who have preserved their pristine independence. To what cause this singularity is attributable, it is difficult to determine. Their oral history is extremely limited and imperfect, and they appear to retain no recollections of a period when their political condition was materially different from what it now is. Of their origin they know nothing. A regular tradition or national legend, seems never to have entered into the policy of these erratic sons of the forest. Careless of the future, they are indifferent to the benefits that accrue from the recollections of the past. The revolving day imbodies all their concerns. Their songs, which are few and of little variation, however ancient they may be, are rather didactic than historical, and are calculated to fire the warriors zeal, or to give solemnity to funeral lamentations. It is however, presumable, that their wandering mode of life and the remoteness and seclusion of the country through which they have ranged time immemorial, have mainly contributed to perpetuate both the identity and the independence of a tribe, whose numbers and capacities for war, are far inferior to others of their proscribed race, that have become almost or quite extinct, by the deleterious spread of a corrupt and unsocial civilization.

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By comparison with the several minor hordes that are located in the province of Texas, the Comanchees are certainly a very considerable nation. But much is abstracted from their political importance, by their habitual indolence, and their utter unfitness for any thing like serious and protracted warfare. I speak relatively, and under the presumption that they are to be seriously and perseveringly opposed. Without, however, making any moral abatements, they will fall considerably short of the opinion that has obtained in your quarter, as to their actual strength. The idea has been frequently propagated that they can furnish from 12 to 20,000 warriors, and those too of no ordinary prowess.

I do not conceive it necessary to inculcate exaggerated notions of their aggregate strength, or individual bravery, in order to make out their pretensions to the notice of at least the territorial government of Arkansas. Estimate them as they really are, and they may be found sufficiently formidable to excite alarm in a feeble and unprotected frontier; and no portion of our country has partaken less of the parental kindness of the federal administration, than that which is most immediately exposed to their depredations. The following will be found as correct a statement of their numbers and general character as a close observation during a residence among them for several months, has enabled me to obtain.

The tribe known among us by the term Comanchees, is divided into three great parties, each of which is distinguished by a separate appellation, to wit:

Comanchees, Yamparacks, and Tenaways.*

The Comanchees, the lower or most southern party, range through a section of country that is watered by the Colorado or Red river of Texas, embracing in their circuits both sides of the river, from its headwaters to the confluence

*There were at this time at least half a dozen Comanche divisions. It is well to remember that Burnet had direct acquaintance with relatively few Comanches and his means of learning about the others was limited.

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of the St. Saba, which empties into the Colorado about 60 miles north of St. Antonio. Their migrations are bounded on the west by the mountains, which are generally barren and destitute of game, and on the east by the river Brazos. It is this band principally, that is engaged in the predatory warfare upon the inhabitants of Texas, which they have prosecuted with great assiduity for several years past and which they have continued, with short intervals of peace, from time "whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary." Their incursions have not been confined to the province of Texas, which the miserable attempt at revolution in 1812 has effectually, drained of its once immense herds of mules and horses, but they extend their depredations to the several contiguous provinces beyond the Rio Grande. This party can probably bring into the field about 1500 warriors; but to parade this number, I doubt whether they would not be obliged to put in requisition the virgin bows of unfledged boyhood. The largest party they have been known to muster for a campaign, was estimated by eye-witnesses at 12 or 1500 men; and those who are apprised of the imposing spectacle exhibited by a Comanchee parade, will not suspect a *coup d'oeil* estimate, of extenuation. It was known that many of their kindred band, the Yamparacks, were associated with them, and contributed to eke out the formidable array.

I will resume my remarks as opportunity may offer.

B*****.

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, May 15, 1824]

Letter II

The next party in geographical order is the Yamparacks. These occupy the head waters of the Colorado, occasionally extending their migrations to the tributary streams of the Rio del Norte. They frequently intermingle with, and are found among the Comanchees and are, in no respect dissimilar to them, in manners, customs or appearance, but are virtually the same people, speak the same language, and are characterized by the same peculiarities. There is one

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exception, however, to the general resemblance.—The Yamparacks are more honest and punctilious in their dealings, and much less addicted to thievery. This may be accounted for, by the fewness of their opportunities of trade; the commercial intercourse between the Indians and whites, has invariably had a demoralizing influence on the untutored Savages.

The Yamparacks can probably furnish from 7 to 800 warriors. These frequently unite with the Comanchees, and participate largely in their depredations on the provincial Spaniards.

Of the Tenaways my information is less minute and authentic, they being seldom visited in their distinct villages by Americans. But they sometimes descend by families, or small parties, to the Comanchee range, to solicit the charity of their brethren who are more contiguous to our settlements, and are constantly supplied with a profusion of such articles as their fancies or necessities require, and who are extremely liberal to their less favored and often destitute kindred. From the representations of the Comanchees and some of their own chiefs, I conclude their numerical strength does not vary much from that of the Yamparacks. This would place the entire aggregate force of the three tribes at about 3000 warriors, which I presume is a probable computation.

The Tenaways range through a mountainous district that separates the waters of the Rio del Norte, from the rivers of Texas, and they sometimes extend their perambulations to the head waters of the Red River of Natchitoches. They carry on a small traffic with the Spaniards of Santa Fee, from whom they receive blankets, knives and tobacco, in exchange for the mules and horses which they capture from the Spaniards of the adjacent Provinces. They often mingle with the Yamparacks when traversing the southern extreme of their range. The utmost harmony subsists between these several bands. They have no distinct limits assigned them, neither does one party claim, in relation to another, any exclusive sovereignty over the particular sec-

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175 628 tion of country which custom seems to have appropriated to its more special use and occupancy.

621 622 175 These three great national parties, are subdivided into captaincies or villages, to each of which is appointed a chief, whose distinction seems to consist rather in name than authority. His name however, gives title to the flying village, and is useful in this respect, as some sign of discrimination

621 175 is necessary, and they can derive none from locality. These subdivisions are various and contingent, each member being at liberty to withdraw from one village and unite with another, as caprice or convenience may dictate.

175 221 As the Comanchees do not cultivate the ground, but derive their subsistence from the spontaneous productions of nature, and chiefly from the animal kingdom, they are necessarily migratory, and obliged to change their encamp-

[231] ment every ten or fifteen days. The scarcity of game, which is soon taught to avoid their dangerous neighborhood, and the speedy exhaustion of convenient pasturage, which is indispensable to the subsistence of their large herds of mules and horses, are the principal reasons for such frequent re-

175 202 movals. When about to abandon a position, they generally fire the grass, to give intelligence of their decampment to absentees;—smoke is likewise employed as a telegraph to announce the return of a war party. It is not uncommon to see, at the same time, 8 or 10 of these signals darkening the horizon, and rearing their columns in gloomy grandeur, to the vertex of a serene and brilliant atmosphere.

175 643 The three parties collectively acknowledge one head or grand Chief, who is selected from either party. His appointment is indefinite as to duration and extent of authority, the latter depending more on the force of his personal char-

175 [642] [671] [692] acter, than on the investments of office. Indeed a positive official authority, is not recognized in their crude system of government. They have but few traditionary laws, and these, they are not always capable of enforcing. Compulsion is seldom exercised on a refractory culprit; and when imperious circumstances require it to be done, it is effected by a convention of chiefs, whose personal influences become auxiliary to an otherwise impotent authority.

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auxiliary to an otherwise impotent authority. The pains and penalties of their criminal laws, are confined almost exclusively to the weaker sex. The incontinence of a wife, is punished by cutting off her nose. This odious abscission is made from the junction of the cartilage and bond, obliquely down to the lip. Several instances of this shocking penal infliction are now extant. But the sentence of mutilation is sometimes remitted in consequence of the interposition of male connections. The decisions of the law always yield to a determined resistance.

If one man wantonly kills another, the nearest friend of the deceased, is permitted, and indeed it devolves upon him as a duty, to revenge his death, by taking the life of the murderer. But the price of blood, may be commuted for articles of more value and convenience than blood, and murder may be atoned for, and the spirit of revenge appeased by liberal donations to the living relatives of the deceased. Such atrocities however, seldom occur. Notwithstanding the extreme laxity of their whole economy of government, and their entire exemption from legal restraint, they live together with a degree of harmony that would do credit to the most refined and best organized societies. The little bickerings and jealousies and inordinate strivings for thrift and distinction, that disquiet and mar the social circles of refinement, are unknown to the rude and simple children of nature.

The Comanchee system of religion is about as perfect and luminous as that of their jurisprudence. They believe in a Supreme Being, and in a future state of existence, but have adopted no mode or manner of worship. Indeed they consider the Supreme Being, to be so far removed from them as not to wish to interfere directly, in their temporal concerns, and as equally unwilling to be interfered with. They therefore leave him to enjoy his repose without molestation, and expect the same indulgence for themselves. They have no idea of a special superintending Providence, or that the Great Spirit takes any particular cognizance of the actions of men. And they consequently defer all their devotional concerns, if indeed they entertain any, to a dark futurity,

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which has never been shadowed to their minds, except by the faint and flickering light of nature. The beams of divine revelation have never penetrated the dismal mists that constitute their moral atmosphere. They nevertheless believe in a final accountability, in which they plainly, but perhaps unconsciously, indicate a sentiment of the omniscience and ubiquity of the Great Judge of Heaven and Earth. By an obvious and natural impulse of unenlightened reason, which is most apt to prefigure the joys and sorrows of a future state, by the experience of the past and present, they suppose that when a good man dies, he goes to a fertile and salubrious country where the Buffaloes, which furnish their principal and favorite aliment, and every desirable species of game are abundant, and where they will enjoy the charms of the chase, with a more exquisite zest, without interruption and without satiety. The reverse of this destiny is assigned to the wicked, who they imagine will be driven away, to linger out a miserable existence, among rugged and sterile hills that are infested with all manner of noxious animals, and where the Buffaloes, Deer and Bears are scarce, and meagre and unsavory to the palate. Goodness, however, in their system of ethics, is a qualified term that has reference to acts of public benefit and renown, such as taking of scalps, expert and successful hunting, and dexterity in stealing from their enemies, rather than to the gentler virtues, that adorn and humanize and purify the heart.

They believe in polytheism and in both good and evil spirits of either sex, but claim supremacy to the one Great Being, whom they represent as a Big Man, that can never die, and who is the peculiar original parent of the Comanchee race. The origin of other nations they assign to other subordinate Deities, and as their father is the Greatest God in Heaven, so they think themselves the greatest nation on earth. They attribute an inferior modicum of divinity to the sun, and suppose all febrile diseases to emanate from the displeasure of that magnificent candle of nature. They have no order of priesthood, but are not altogether exempt from the juggles of priestcraft. They have no symbols of true faith, neither do they know any distinction of days or seasons.

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seasons. In short they have no visible, operative religion; and such notions as they do entertain, are mere fanciful speculations, that apparently have not the slightest practical influence on their lives and conduct. They are enveloped in thick darkness, and live, and die in dismal estrangement from the God of Heaven.

B.

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, May 22, 1824]

Letter III

The Comanchees, like all other heathen nations, mingle with the crudities of their religious tenets, some exceedingly absurd and unintelligible fantasies, to which they adhere with all the tenacity of a blind superstition. They believe in witchcraft, and impute to persons whom they suspect to be possessed of the "evil spirit", the most mischievous and diabolical propensities. All internal diseases, the nature or cause of which they do not comprehend, and they are by no means skilled in physics, they attribute to the *blasting breath* of some secret enemy, who is endowed by evil genii with the mystical powers of enchantment. They say the unhappy subject has been "blown", and represent the manner of communicating the occult infection, by blowing through the hand. These tricks of sorcery they sometimes charge to the evil disposed of their own people, but are never able to detect and identify the foul fiend, or instant immolation would be his destiny. They hold the Kitchies (a small band on a branch of the River Trinity) in peculiar detestation, on account of their supposed powers of *blowing;* and charge them with having "blown" the waters that intersect their route to Natchitoches, which has rendered their visits to that post so destructive to their people. Whatever may be the nature of the hidden disease, the consequence is often a gradual dissolution of the miserable victim, who pines away in langour and despondency, amidst unavailing threats of vengeance upon his mysterious adversary. The few persons I have seen who were supposed to have been "blown", have exhibited all the external symptoms of pulmonary affection: but the mild and equable tem-

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perament of the climate they inhabit, would seem to preclude the existence of consumptive diseases amongst them. They have faith in certain preternatural charms, and think, or affect to think, the oil of the beaver rubbed on the surface of the body, an impenetrable barrier to a ball; and will relate with infinite self-complacency, how the Goch-chupin's (Spaniards) balls, have hit them here and there, and fallen harmless to the ground. This idea may possibly have some operation and impart a factitious boldness to their minds, when opposed to the *Scopete* or Spanish musket; but few will be found of sufficient hardihood to repose confidence in their magical shields, when assailed by the ball of a rifle. They have an indescribable dread of that potent and unerring weapon. They sometimes wear around the neck, one or more highly aromatic kernels, resembling the Vanilla bean, which they esteem as amulets of infallible efficacy in preventing disease; and they indulge many other and more frivolous whimsicalities that are not worthy of notice in a description so cursory as this.

The Comanchees admit of polygamy to an unlimited extent, and have no fixed ceremonials of marriage. Their principal warriors have often from five to eight or ten wives, being restrained only by their own capricious humours. Carno-san-tua, (The Son of America), a chief of some note, left 10 widows to bewail his untimely death. The most comely of them, however, were soon dispersed, to herd with the connubial slaves of other Lords of the creation; while the less favoured retained their weeds, and prolonged their severe and sanguinary discipline of lamentation for the dead. The redoubtable warrior generally proportions the number of his help-mates to his means of maintenance, which implies simply animal sustentation, and in procuring which, his only agency is the killing of game. His wives, one or more of whom are always in attendance on his hunting excursions, perform the duties of ostler in catching, saddling, and turning out his horse; of page, in carrying his implements of the chase; of butcher and porter, in skinning and transporting his meat; and of cook and waiter, in preparing and serving it up. The Squaws are

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The Squaws are [ca. 1818] literally "hewers of wood and drawers of water," to their dominate and supercilious husbands. Every description of domestic labour is imposed upon them to a degree not usual, even among savages, and they seem to endure the burden with an uncomplaining cheerfulness; or rather, with the quiescence of a temper subdued by habit and ignorance, to a condition the most onerous and humiliating. But commiseration is more sensibly awakened to their moral, than to their physical state, for they exhibit a total departure from every thing that is amiable or interesting in the sex. To the most hideous degeneracy from feminine suavity and agreeableness of person, they unite a more than commensurate debasement of mind and manners. The choice porcelain of nature has become as the coarsest potters clay; and the bland adornments of female character, have given place to a fierce and unmitigated barbarism. In truth the largest portion of the nation's barbarity consists in the character of their women. They are infinitely more cruel and ferocious than the men, and are much more addicted to pilfering, in which they have acquired a proficiency that almost defies detection. They take a peculiar delight in torturing the adult male prisoners, who, according to an ancient custom, are surrendered to their fiend-like amusement for three days succeeding their arrival in the village. The quantum of punishment that is inflicted, is however, in some degree proportioned to the events of the campaign. If the war party have suffered no damage, it is comparatively light and trivial, amounting only to a few gentle flagellations, by way of giving merriment to the dance, and cadence to the song of triumph. But those who are captured on a disastrous excursion, are punished with a most revolting barbarity, that often terminates in death. During the three days of abandonment by the men, the prisoner is stretched on the ground, each extremity pinioned to a stake, where he lies motionless, save in the writhings of fear and anguish, and exposed to the fury of the squaws, who alternately recreate themselves by inflicting on their prostrate enemy every variety of torture that a savage fancy can suggest. At evening the passive victim is released, to undergo a more

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complicated suffering. The well known shout "come to the dance," resounds through the camp, and the welkin rings with the screams and yells of infuriate females, trooping impetuous to the scene of torment. The wretched captive, bearing a staff on which are pendent, the scalps of his friends and companions, it may be, of his father and brethren who were slain in the fury of the recent combat, is hurried to the appointed spot, where the frantic crowd assemble around him, impatient to begin their orgies. Faint with fear and trembling, he is hurled to the centre, while the shouting throng gather around in tumultuous circles, and assail him with clubs, and thongs, and knives, and javelins, and firebrands, in unmeasured and reckless fury, compelling him the while, to unite his voice with the hellish choir, to dance and sing, and wave the standard, reeking with the gory scalps of his kindred, until he sinks to the ground, borne down with fatigue and excess of torment. He is then again staked-out on the earth, to await the diversions of the morrow, and the morrow—when similar scenes are re-acted upon him. If haply, he survives this severe initiation, he is afterwards exempt from corporal punishment, is considered a member, *sub conditionis*, of their society, and is attached as a slave to the family of the warrior who captured him, where he is generally treated with humanity. The men object to the abolition of this dreadful custom of surrendering their prisoners, on account of its antiquity, and the gratification it affords the squaws; but they will sometimes interfere to repress excessive barbarities.

[56] [178]

When they capture boys and girls, as they often do in their excursions to the Spanish provinces, they usually treat them with much lenity and kindness, and retain them in a kind of filial servitude, very little inferior to the condition of native children. It is singular with what facility these ill-fated youths will assimilate themselves to the habits of their new associates. Spanish boys from 10 to 15 years old will become so reconciled to their captivity in a few weeks after their introduction to this wild and uncultured society, as to be distinguishable only by the slight variations of nature, from their savage companions, and will generally out-

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strip them in rude and vicious licentiousness. There are, however, some instances of tenacious sensibility, sufficient perhaps to redeem the species from this lamentable propensity to deterioration.

My next Letter will close the subject of the Comanchees.

B.

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, June 5, 1824]

Letter IV.

The Comanchees conduct all their military operations on horseback. So exclusively are they habituated to the cavalry mode of warfare, that to place them on foot would be in effect, to put them *hors de combat*, to render them totally inefficient. They are generally well mounted when on a hostile excursion, and are scarcely exceeded in the art of horsemanship, to which they are trained from early infancy. Both in war and hunting, they rely much on the speed of their horses, and are careful to select for their own use, the best and fleetest among their furtive herds.

The day previous to starting for war, the party militant parade through the village mounted and accountred, and bedaubed with paints, in their most gallant and frightful style. They march, or rather gallop in a line of single file, and have very few evolutions; but they contrive to give diversity and effect to their maneuvers, by frequent hideous yells, and antic gesticulations, which, combined with their wild and savage costume, give to the exhibition, if not a dreadful, at least a superlatively ludicrous appearance. Their habiliments on these occasions seem to be a motley assemblage of every rude and awkward device that can render their externals grotesque and terrific, or rather, to an informed spectator, fantastical and ridiculous.—A stranger might well imagine that he had gotten upon the parade ground of the Prince of Pandemonium: but an acquaintance with the real characters of the seemingly hideous spectres that shock and astound his vision, would convert the appalling spectacle into a scene of pantomimical foolery. These

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175 doughty warriors are much more terrible in appearance,
726 than in reality; and such is generally the character of the southern Indians.

[492] They always set out on their predatory adventures to the provinces with two creatures; a mule or inferior horse to perform the drudgery of the journey, and their favorite war-horse, who is carefully led, and kept fresh, and vigorous, until arriving in the vicinity of the intended object of attack. The most wary circumspection is then adopted in all their [492] movements. A private encampment is formed, deep em- [593] bosomed in the forest, where the fatigue horses, with the saddles and other baggage are deposited, in charge of a few men, and perhaps women, who often accompany their husbands on their military excursions, and answer all the purposes of grooms and menials. The more daring warriors sally out under cover of moon-light, from this secret rallying point, to reconnoitre the neighboring settlement in quest of prey. They so regulate their departure from home as to arrive at the intended place of assault about the full of the
175 moon, and always make their attack at midnight. If they
726 succeed in capturing a drove of mules and horses, they drive
727 them with the utmost speed, night and day, until they cross
231 the Rio Grande, beyond which they are seldom pursued. They frequently drive off a thousand head of these animals at one time; but many of them are destroyed on the way by crossing water-courses, or worn out by fatigue and abandoned to perish; or should they revive, to herd with the wild horses, numerous gangs of which roam through the country, where a perennial verdure affords them an abundant subsistence.

175 The number of mules and horses that these Indians
727 capture annually from the Spaniards is immense, probably
231 not less than 10,000, and perhaps the one half of these are destroyed, or left derelict, in the hurry and tumult of the homeward march.

175 The warriors, when they venture from their hiding-
726 place, which they seldom do, except under favor of the
492 Queen of Night, either to reconnoitre, or make an attack,
714

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always ride without saddles, and without any other encumbrance than the waist-cloth to their persons.—This lightness of apparel gives them a manifest advantage over their Spanish adversaries, whose horses are heavily caparisoned, and whose persons are embarrassed by a cumbrous load of accoutrements that partake more of the pomp, than the uses of war. Light shot guns, javelins, or lances, about 8 feet long, and bows and arrows compose their weapons. For defence they wear on the left wrist, a shield made of Buffaloes hide, consolidated when green by a process in which fire is the principal agent. They are made in an oval or circular form, about two feet in diameter, and presenting a surface slightly convexed. They are exceedingly tough, quite impenetrable to an arrow, and often so to the ball of a *scopete;* and they are light and easily disengaged from the arm in case of emergency. The loss of a shield does not attach an inexpiable disgrace to the character of a Comanchee warrior. They are comparatively novices in the use of fire-arms, and have an insuperable aversion to the weight of Rifles, but employ the bow and lance with great dexterity, and to a dispersed and retreating enemy, with destructive effect. The known capacity of their horses, and their minute acquaintance with the invaded country, which enables them generally to surprise the indolent and inert Spaniards, concurring with the miserable condition of the provinces for defense, inspire them with an artificial fearlessness, which invests them in the view of their ignorant and spiritless enemies, with the hideous horrors of the basilisk. But in truth, these horrors are imaginary: oppose them with decision and energy, and they will crouch like the Spaniel, or fly like the "stricken fawn."—They usually make what they term their grand campaign, once a year, either in the spring or fall season, when the three bands unite and co-operate in plundering and devastating the defenceless provinces that are contiguous to the Rio Grande. Besides these periodical invasions, the preparations for which, bear some resemblance to the pomp and circumstance of war, and the issues are frequently most disastrous to the exposed Provincials; there is a continual egress and

175 726 [492] [714]
175 411
175 714 [237]
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175 721

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721 regress of small parties from 5 to 50 in number, whose sole object is inglorious predation, and who cautiously avoid all renconters with the enemy, except with the menial herdsmen who attend the droves of the wealthy planters.

[171] [181] Although habitually savage and estranged from the humanizing influence of civilization, the Comanchee warriors are not so wantonly barbarous and sanguinary as many of the primitive nations of our continent. It is true, they 175 seldom give quarter to the Spanish soldiers, and it is equally 726 true, that they seldom receive any from them. It has been alleged too, that they massacre women and children. The charge is not true as to general practice, but there may be some isolated exceptions, growing out of pressing emergency 175 or some extraordinary excitement. When reproved on this 721 awful subject, these undisciplined warriors justify their deeds of horror, as more enlightened nations have attempted to justify theirs, by the law of retaliation: and I suspect that a strict investigation would evince but little disparity in the inhumanities that are reciprocally practiced by these savage and semi-savage belligerents.

175 The Comanchees are always at war with the Osages and 721 Pawnees. A formal declaration has perhaps never tran- 648 spired, but whenever they meet, hostilities ensue. Frequent and sometimes sanguinary recontres happen between them, 175 the Osages and Pawnees being in general the aggressors. In 721 the fall of the year these tribes abandon their villages, and lead a wandering life, ostensibly for the purpose of hunting. They often roam as far as the Comanchee region, professedly in quest of Buffalo, but in reality to "spoil the spoiler of his prey," in which they frequently succeed so far as to return well mounted, although they always leave home on foot. The Comanchees sometimes retaliate upon them by carrying the war into their country; but having little to gain by these excursions, they are unfrequent. Simple bootless war, has few attractions for a people who have neither poets nor historians to perpetuate the fame of their achievements.

175 152 Strong attachment to kindred is a prominent feature in

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the Indian character. The Comanchees manifest their sensibilities by mourning vehemently for the dead. They continue their lamentations stately, morning and evening, for a length of time proportioned to the affinity and the consequence of the deceased. The women shave their heads and scarify themselves with knives or sharp flints, until they are literally covered with blood. Whether they have derived this practice from the discomfited prophets of Baal, (I Kings 18, 28) is for learned antiquarians to determine. The men set too much value on the velvet softness of their tawny skins, to have them scarred and serrated by so unprofitable a custom; but they will sometimes shave their heads, which is also considered a grievous retrenchment of masculine beauty. At each periodical lament, the bereaved relations assemble unitedly to bewail their departed friend. Tears are shed in copious profusion, accompanied by loud and plaintive strains of hideous dissonance, not unlike the howlings of ravening wolves. The goods and chattels of the deceased, including his tent and all its apparatus, are sometimes burnt; and such of his horses and mules as the avarice of the living will relinquish, are killed in order to be transferred to the hunting grounds of Elysium, for the future benefit and behoof of the dead. It was estimated by eye-witnesses, that during the prevalence of the small-pox among them in 1819, when they were swept off, as with the besom of destruction, there were not less than 5000 of these valuable animals immolated in this manner. The mode of conducting their funeral obsequies, I have never witnessed, and believe they sedulously avoid the observation of strangers of these occasions.

[Note. The length of this letter compels us to divide it. The rest will appear next week.]

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, June 12, 1824]

Letter IV.

[Concluded]

Vanity, certainly, is not peculiar to the Comanchees, but they possess more vanity both national and personal,

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than any other people whatever. Foppery in all its con-
175 temptible gradations, of dress, deportment and mental noth-
ingness and insipidity is the prevailing characteristic of the
young men. An Indian Dandy would, to be sure, be an
amusing *unique* in the circles of fashion; but if you could
transport a full dressed Comanchee buck into a coterie of
our most exquisite "Delectables," my word for it, he would
eclipse them in all the essential properties of that profes-
sion. The squaws from the infancy are too completely
servile to bestow either time or solicitude on the ornaments
175 of person. The men are large, and well proportioned and
142 generally, good looking—the women, as much the reverse
as human nature will bear. As a nation, they think them-
175 selves the most numerous and powerful on earth—and will
186 listen with incredulous wonderment to a recital of facts that
controul this flattering opinion.—So true is it that ignorance
and vanity are inseparably allied.

175 The Comanchees do not cultivate the earth, but subsist
224 for the most part on the erratic Buffaloes which descend
136 into their district in the fall, in pursuit of a verdant herbage,
and return in the spring, (such of them as survive the dep-
redations of their numerous biped enemies) to their north-
ern range. It has been remarked that the number of Buf-
faloes that annually reach the regions inhabited by the Co-
000 manchees, has sensibly diminished within a few years. In
the event of a serious failure of that munificent provision
of nature, these and other tribes of similar habits, will be
compelled to resort to agriculture, or to recede northwardly
[461] in pursuit of their ancient prey. The former of these alter-
natives would be difficult of adoption, on account of their
native inertness and aversion to labor; and the latter would
probably be rendered impracticable by the jealousy of other
tribes, who already occupy the northern wilds.

175 These wandering savages have made but small ad-
342 vances in the domestic arts. Their lodges or tents, are
[237] formed of Buffaloe hides dressed to a suitable consistency,
and erected on poles, in the shape of an elongated cone,
having an aperture at the top to emit the smoke, which
purpose it answers but very imperfectly. They are exces-

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sively uncomfortable in cold or wet weather, and are at best but miserable shelters. The interior furniture consists altogether of the skins of different animals, principally Buffaloe robes, which are spread on the ground, and compose their beds, bedding and all. They use neither chairs, stools, nor tables. In the culinary art they have improved but little upon the most obvious suggestions of nature, and are exceedingly filthy and loathsome in all their household economy. They have no cooking utensils of their own construction, and prefer copper kettles on account of their being easily portable and not subject to fracture. They mostly boil their meat, but sometimes broil it on the coals or roast it on spits. During the summer months they often suffer intensely by hunger, purely from defect of art, and frugality in husbanding their means of subsistence. Whole villages are sometimes three or four days without a particle of animal or vegetables food. Their sufferings are borne in common, and if one hunter is more fortunate than the rest, his game is distributed gratuitously through the whole village. In times of scarcity the men hold it a matter of conscience and pride, to sustain the severest portion of the general privations, and to bear them without murmuring. And indeed they manifest a capacity for enduring abstinence, that would almost lead one to imagine nature had furnished their organic system with a peculiar adaptation to the various contingencies of their existence. When meat is abundant, they gorge and gormandize most voraciously, without experiencing any subsequent inconvenience; and when it is scarce, then endure hunger with singular patience, and comparatively trivial relaxation of the animal functions. Habit is capable of controlling both mind and matter. Being accustomed to pursue their game altogether on horseback, they seldom obtain any other than the Buffaloes, of which they usually have an adequate supply during the cold months, from November to March. They reserve but little from the winter's profusion to supply the scarcity of summer, having no other mode of preventing putrefaction, than by cutting the meat into very thin slices, and exposing it to the sun until it is entirely desicated by exhalation. As you may

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262 imagine, these beef chips are neither very palatable nor alimental after this operation; but they are still meat, and
175 meat is always desirable to a carniverous savage. The bene-
317 ficient author of nature has given them an inexhaustible supply of salt. They procure this excellent fossil from a saline near the sources of the Rio Brazos, where it is indurated by natural evaporation, into masses of different dimensions. When pulverized, it is of a beautiful whiteness, not
175 inferior to our best table salt. But owing to their roving
263 habits, the Indians are frequently destitute of this healthful and savoury ingredient in animal food, and eat their meat for months together without seasoning of any kind. They do not consider this privation as a very serious matter.

175 They make a kind of bread of the pods of the locust
262 tree, which grows abundantly throughout their range. These pods possess a small portion of sacchrine matter which renders the meal cohesive and gives it an agreeable though somewhat insipid taste; but in substance it is about as edible as saw-dust, which it resembles in appearance. The Peccan tree grows luxuriantly on all their water courses, and the delightful nut it affords, together with black and red hawes, prickly-pear apples, and some other spontaneous fruits, and a few excellent roots, eke out the scanty subsistence of these people, during the absence of their favorite Buffaloes.

175 Some of the lower or southern villages make an annual
22 visit to the Whacoes (a small tribe located on the Brazos)
[439] and traffic horses for beans, melons, and corn. But owing to
[261] their frequent migrations, they are not able to transport a permanent stock of these articles; and very soon after returning from the corn feast of their more provident neighbours, they relapse into their habitual alternations of feast or famine.

175 But Providence seems to have provided them with some
165 natural indemnities against the physical evils that might be supposed incidental to their irregular and versatile manner
[164] of life. Notwithstanding their frequent and painful privations, they are subject to few diseases, and exhibit many instances of remarkable longevity. Men, whose furrowed

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Men, whose furrowed [ca. 1818] cheeks and blanched locks palpably indicate what we would call an extreme old age, and who by their own traditionary accounts, have felt the frosts of an hundred winters, will not relinquish the sports of their youth, the hunting of Buffaloes on horseback. The almost unqualified salubrity of the climate they occupy, certainly has a large share in this unusual prolongation of life and activity. Their being altogether debarred, by local remoteness from civilization, from the use of spirituous liquors, is another prominent reason of their healthful condition. How happy would it be, for the abused and degraded aborigines of our country, had they all been equally secluded from access to that baleful poison of the moral and physical man. Their intercourse with their more refined and cultivated neighbors, might in that case have been productive of many benefits to this hapless race, whereas it has been replete with disaster.

B.

[*The Cincinnati Literary Gazette*, July 3, 1824]

A brief desultory and imperfect vocabulary of the Comanche language; respectfully dedicated to Professor Rafinesque of Transylvania University [Lexington, Ky.]

Too-he-whistee—Man
Whiep—Woman
App—Father
Pe a—Mother
Too-a—Son
Pate—Daughter
Ta-que-ne-whap—Chief captain
Pe ee sheamp—Private soldier
Tav-e-vo—Spaniard
Carno—American
Inkernish—English
Pavom-pete—White man
Tu-he-wheete—Red or color'd men
Hanche—Friend
Hanche-ka-a—Enemy
Taa-ve—Sun
Mu-ur—Moon
So-co-vete—The Earth
Tasheno—Stars
Kar-me-ad-tasheno—North or not moving star
Tucan—Night
Ta-bane—Day
Oot-sa-inte—Winter or cold
Urra-inte—Summer or warm

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Sau-nipp—Grass
Hoophe—Trees
Ooth-table—Dirt, earth
Toome-pee—Stones
Paa-ve—Water
Tath-cabe—Snow
Pe-a-aiate—Gun
Arrico-aiate—Bow
Parke—Arrow
Cheeke—Lance
Nar-quitts—Powder
Nab-bark—Ball
Whee—Knife
Whee-a—Rope, Lareat or halter
Whee-o—Awl
Chome—Beads
Whan-nap—Blanket
Tosha-whan-nap—Red blanket
Inka-whan-nap—White blanket
Kit-sante—Bad, wicked, ugly
Kish-a-wante—Very bad, very ugly
Ha-a—Yes
Kaia—No
Car-nhe—House, tent
Hox-ee—Where, which
Oox-ee—There, that
Ix-ee—Here, this
Mar-tim-erow—To trade, buy and sell
Tome—Give
Me jacke—Give me, bring to me
So-base—Long time, far off
Oo-kist-ee—Now, presently, short time
Mee-isthee—Near, not far off
Man-anke—Far off, great distance
No-be-tink—To encamp
Nab-e-tink—To fight, war
Nad-de-no—Saddle
Array—Bridle
Noothe-pee—Whip
Poon kee—Horse
Cootes—Buffaloe
Sha-ree—Dog
Parrow-a—Bear
Harnish—Beaver
Too-he-a—Deer
Tooth-cap—Meat
Tooth-kee—To eat
Ho-ove—To drink
Na-rath-too-kee—Mockasin
Coo-she—Leggins
Coo-ne—Fire
Too is-chee-kee—Axe or hatchet
Pe-nar—Honey
Ha-nebe—Corn
Pohe-pe-nar—Watermelon
Nar-que-see—Pumpkin
Paam-pee—Head
Phee—Heart
Poo-ur—Arm
Oom—Leg
Tu-ruth-kee—To steal
Noof-kim—Go, begone
Kim-ai—Come
Obes-kee—To kill
Pay-ee—Blood